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Quality of study programs at the University of Vienna: Sensemaking in times of reform overload

Abstract

This paper reports about an organisational development project at the University of Vienna that focused on the quality of study programmes, especially on a joint understanding for describing the quality of study programs and for integrating different internal processes into a comprehensive quality management for the development, implementation and improvement of study programs. The project is put in context with general changes of the national regulatory framework in Austria, and with their realisation at the University of Vienna.

These developments will be analyzed towards concepts of standardisation and regulation of institutional management, asking about the relationship between the standardisation of degrees and the standardisation of management approaches.

Index

Introduction

In 2008 the Rectorate and the Senate of the University of Vienna jointly commissioned an internal project Quality of Teaching at the University of Vienna[1]. This project aimed at offering room for strategic considerations beyond the daily business, comparing the local situation with international experiences, developing a joint understanding of quality and help to coordinating and further developing existing processes and instruments within the organisation.

The starting position for this project was the adaptation of most of the studies offered at the university to the European degree structure between 2005 and 2008. This efficient change of curricular was taken as the starting point for a further, continuous development of study programs. Part of the political context for the implementation of the new degree structure was not only the European level of the Bologna process, but also the new university law ('Universitätsgesetz', UG 2002), which influenced the organisation of universities and their curricula. Both developments resulted in the establishment of new organisational functions (especially the positions of heads of study programs) and of new support units (especially the Special Unit for Quality Assurance and the Center for Teaching and Learning).

The project Quality of Teaching was realized as an organisational development project, with a strong involvement of stakeholders within the organisation. During the course of the project, qualitative interviews have been performed and two internal workshops have been organised. The first workshop developed some preliminary cornerstones for a joint understanding of the quality of study programs, the second dealt with structures and processes for the continuous quality development of study programs.

Before going into the details of the project, it is necessary to briefly sketch the changes in national regulations in Austria, and to describe the reactions of University of Vienna to these regulations.

National regulations

Organisational reform

In 2000, after long debates and considerable preparatory work, University of Vienna was among the last universities to 'switch' to a new organisational structure, as required by the law on the organisation of universities ('Universitätsorganisationsgesetzt', UOG 1993). This changed the status of the university from a fully dependent entity (according to the old UOG 1975) that had been subordinated to the ministry of science, to a semi dependent legal entity that was entitled to sign contracts.

Without much evaluation of this reform, government introduced a new law on universities ('Universitätsgesetz', UG 2002), which pushed universities even further towards a status of full institutional autonomy as corporate bodies of public law. This time, universities had less time to adapt, since they were obliged to implement the new regulations by 2004.

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[1] Between 2008 and 2009, I have been employed at the University of Vienna and coordinated the project Quality of Teaching (http://ctl.univie.ac.at/qualitaetsentwicklung/qualitaet-in-der-lehre/). As far as the university is concerned, I base my paper on published documents only, to keep the confidentiality of internal debates in this process. The paper reflects my own opinion and judgment, not necessarily the position of the University of Vienna.

The new law significantly changed the roles and structures within the university. It only specified the roles of three decision making bodies at the central level: the senate, the university council ('Universtitätsrat', a governing board), and the rectorate (rector and vice-rectors). Participation of internal stakeholders was concentrated in the senat, which became responsible mainly for decisions on curricula and on the statute of the university. The new governing board was intended to act as a mediator between the university and its external environment (the state and society) and has mainly supervisory tasks. The rectorat became a powerful managerial body, being responsible to develop the organisational plan (and structure), the development plan for the university as the basis for performance agreements with the ministry of science, and for internal objective agreements with the heads of organisational sub-units.

Internally, UG 2002 increased the decision making powers of the central management and the room to develop internal structures and procedures for the organisation. This also led to a declining influence both of status groups and of academic sub-units, since collegial bodies at the sub-unit level were intended to have advisory function only. Apart from chair holding professors, faculty, staff and student representatives felt frustrated, since their prior contributions to organisational and curricular reforms seemed to be devaluated.

Externally, UG 2002 established new procedures between universities and the ministry of science, especially with respect to funding of universities. While the government is still obliged to fund state universities, the new allocation mechanism became based on performance agreements ('Leistungsvereinbarungen'), which are negotiated with each university individually every three years. Universities now receive global budgets (instead of former earmarked funding), and the Rectorat is entitled to distribute these budgets on the basis of internal objective agreements ('Zielvereinbarungen'). Additionally, universities are also obliged to submit an annual intellectual property report ('Wissensbilanz'), a quite detailed description of their activities.

Quality management
Increased institutional autonomy made mechanisms necessary to demonstrate the accountability of universities. Accordingly, the ministry of science issued a decree on the evaluation of research and teaching at universities ('Evaluierungsverordnung', EvalVO 1997) as a complementary regulation, closely connected to the implementation of the UOG 1993. The decree especially mentioned the research performance of academic units, the evaluation of individual courses by students, and the annual progress reports of the heads of institutes.

This regulation was extended by UG 2002, which obliged universities to build up their own quality management systems, comprising all areas of the university. Internal evaluations should be performed in accordance with international standards, but can be determined individually by the statute of the university. Plans on evaluations also became an obligatory part of the performance agreements with the Ministry.

External evaluations were also mentioned by UG 2002, in case they are commissioned by the University Council, the Rectorate or the Ministry. To support the development of quality management systems and external evaluations, the Austrian Quality Agency (AQA) has been founded. Its consultancy and certification services can be used on a voluntary basis. But currently, there exists no uniform requirement for the external evaluation of universities (e.g. program accreditation, institutional audit). However, there is a tendency towards institutional audits. Additionally, in 2009 the Ministry initiated a consultation process on a framework law for external quality assurance mechanisms across the different sectors of the higher educations system, which eventually will lead to a better integration of the respective regulations

for state universities, private universities, and universities of applied science ('Fach-hochschulen').

Curricula reforms
According to the old study law AHStG 1966 ('Allgemeines Hochschulstudiengesetz'), study regulations in Austria had been much centralised. Parliament decided upon the range of study programs at universities, the ministry decided, which university had to offer which range of study programs. Curricula had been nationally harmonised and determined subfields as well as the number of courses and exams to take. In these harmonised structures, local study commissions only could decide upon the distribution of courses, which fit into this framework.

In the UniStG 1997 ('Universitätsstudiengesetz') was passed, which assigned the responsibility for the design of curricula to the local study commissions and left the formal approval with the ministry. Based on self developed qualification profiles for their graduates, study commissions were asked to determine the contents and structure of their curricula, which had to be done till 2002. However, they were also asked to gain feedback on these curricula from representatives of the employment system, which was the reason for much critique and for suspicions about the potential change in the character of university education. As in other German speaking countries as well, many actors opposed the potential shift from a broad university education as general formation to an understanding of education as narrowly defined professional training.

While the first version of the UniStG 1997 was concerned with traditional diploma degrees only, a brief amendment in 1999 prepared the transition to the new European degree structure, since it opened the door for the introduction of additional degrees: bachelor and master. It offered the opportunity for study commissions to choose between traditional diploma degrees and the new bachelor and master degrees. (Pechar et al., 1999, p. 8 ff.).

Again, UG 2002 changed the situation. It assigned the central responsibility for curricula to the senate of the university, leaving details of this arrangement to be determined within the university. With respect to degrees, it stated that newly introduced curricula had to follow the European degree structure only. However, diploma degrees could be re-established, if they already existed according to UniStG 1997. UG 2002 also demanded the obligatory use of ECTS as an obligatory instrument to describe the student workload of courses and curricula, and determined the length of study programs, 180 ECTS for Bachelor programs and 120 ECTS for Master programs.

Implementing Bologna in Austria
In 1999, Austria was among the first signatories of the Bologna declaration. As has been observed for other countries as well (e.g. by Witte 2006), the implementation of the Bologna Process in Austria had its national peculiarities.

While the legal basis for the creation of bachelor and master degrees at universities had been quickly provided (by an amendment to the UniStG in 1999, and by the UG 2002), these laws defined the opportunity, but not the obligation to introduce the European degree structure. This soft approach is confirmed in a statement of the former Minister, in which he interpreted the Bologna Process as "a significant example for the voluntary cooperation of higher education institutions in the European area" (Bologna Bericht 2009, p. 5, own translation), which suggests a rather small role of the national government and of the Ministry.

If this interpretation is correct, it comes as no surprise that the Ministry developed no road-map or complementary strategy for the implementation of the European degree structure in Austria. While the Ministry regularly monitored the progress of this implementation and was glad about the success of higher education institutions in European stocktaking reports, and while it also built up support structures to provide information and advice, it did not itself develop more advanced concepts, strategies or scenarios.

Even if the implementation of the two tier structure is quite successful in Austria in quantitative terms, there was a lack of debate and guidance at the national level, how to distinguish between these two degrees conceptually and with respect to their relevance for the labour market (e.g. what could 'employability' mean for academically oriented university degrees, especially at the bachelor level?). This is met with the lack of a national qualification framework (which is still in consultation among a few experts) and therefore also with a lack of a joint concept for the description of learning outcomes and qualifications. Additionally, a bachelor still is not sufficient to be accepted as for civil service in an academic position, which traditionally would be a form of recognition with strong relevance for other economic sectors as well.

Consequently, quantitative planning scenarios for the transition from bachelor to master at the national level were missing as well. This was especially pressing, since the open access policy in Austria does not only apply to bachelor programs, but to master programs as well. Additionally, UG 2002 rigidly defined the duration of bachelor and master programs as 3+2 years. No wonder that some actors felt "left alone" by the Ministry in implementing Bologna (Teichler and Hildbrand, 2008).

Reforms at the University of Vienna

The following section will briefly sketch the reactions of the University of Vienna to the new national framework, mainly focusing on structures, procedures and instruments, which are related to teaching activities and study programs.

Central decision making bodies

UG 2002 defined three decision making bodies at the central level of the university: the Senate, the Rectorate and the University Council. Some details of these bodies can be defined by the university.

Senate

The Senate is composed of 10 chair holding professors from different faculties, 2 representatives of other academic staff, 1 representative of general staff, and 5 student representatives, which are all appointed via elections. According to the UG 2002, the Senate is responsible for the approval of curricula, after having considered statements from both Rectorate and University Council.

At University of Vienna, the senate created a smaller Curricula Commission, which checks all curricula and prepares them for the final approval decision. The Curricula Commission is entitled to establish decentral Curricula Workgroups ('Curricular Arbeitsgruppen', Curricula AG), which are composed of representatives professors, academics and students from the respective disciplines. These Curricula AG are responsible for proposing drafts for new or amendments for existing curricula.

Rectorate

The Rectorate at the University of Vienna currently is composed out of the rector himself and of four vice-rectors, being responsible for research and career development, for infrastructure, resources and library affairs, for educational program development and internationalisation, and for student affairs and continuing education, respectively.

Close to the Rectorate exists the position of the study praeses, who mainly is responsible for the execution of study regulations. The study praeses can delegate some tasks to the decentral heads of study programs ('Studienprogrammleiter', SPL).

University Council

According to UG 2002, both the Senate and the national government have to nominate an even number of members for the University Council, which jointly decide upon an additional member, who then chairs the council. At the University of Vienna, the University Council consists of nine members. With respect to educational activities, the University Council has to comment on curricula and the provision of educational offerings.

Bureaus of the Senate, the University Council and the Rectorate

While the Bureaus of the Senate and of the University Council are comparatively small and rather administrative units, the Bureau of the Rectorate has a larger staff. It supports the Rectorate in preparing strategies (especially development plan, performance and objectives agreements) and supervising their implementation.

Central support units

With respect to teaching activities and the quality of study programs, the following central support units are of special importance.

Student services and administration

Student Services and Administration ('Studien- und Lehrwesen') is one of the older support units at the University of Vienna. Its main tasks are to provide information on study programs and course offerings, to administrate the formal admission of students and of to support heads of study programs, Study Service Centers and teachers in the administration of teaching and exams. It also hosts the bureau of the study praeses.

Finance & Controlling

As a reaction to new managerial requirements, the former Bursary ('Quästur') was transformed into a support unit for Finance and Controlling. While the former Bursary mainly had administrative tasks (allocating funds in compliance with legal regulation and entitlements), Finance & Controlling gained significant strategic importance. Still being responsible for accounting, it also develops instruments for strategic funding decisions and for the monitoring of measurements and projects.

University of Vienna provides about 180 study programs and about 15.000 individual courses annually. Finance & Controlling is continuously working on the reporting system for tracking student cohorts and developments, utilization of course and exam provision, as well for teaching budgets. There are also some internal financial regulations, which have a severe impact on the design of curricula and for their implementation. For example, the internal rule of cost neutrality requires that the transfer of old diploma programs in new bachelor/master programs must come without additional costs within each field of study.

Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL)
The Center for Teaching and Learning is formal part of the student service and administration unit, but has very distinct characteristics and tasks. CTL was founded in 2009, by merging two other, very unique units, the former Bologna Bureau ('Bologna Büro') and the former Teaching Development unit ('Projekt Lehrentwicklung').

Initially co-funded by a special grant from the ministry, the Bologna Bureau was created on a project basis. Its main task was to accompany the curricula development process for the transfer to the European degree structure by providing information, advice and support to all involved actors at the University of Vienna. It especially focused on issues like legal regulations, the modularisation of curricula, as well as on calculating costs of new curricula (for the history of the Bologna Bureau see Baldinger 2009).

The creation of the Teaching Development unit in 2003 was a reaction of the University of Vienna to grant scheme of the ministry of science, which offered seed funding on a competitive basis for developing and implementing e-learning initiatives at higher education institutions. In the beginning, the main task was to develop and coordinate strategic e-learning projects at the institutional level. The Teaching Development unit started with providing support and training to individual teachers, but increasingly shifted its focus to support the development of e-learning concepts for entire curricula. The obvious next step for the unit was to expand its activities towards general teaching concepts for curricula and faculties, with a diminishing emphasis on e-learning.

Special Unit for Quality Assurance (BEQS)
As a direct reaction to UG 2002, University of Vienna established the Special Unit for Quality Assurance ('Besondere Einrichtung für Qualitätssicherung', BEQS). It is responsible for the quality assessment and evaluation of all units, tasks and activities at the university, especially concerning research, education and administration. With respect to education, its main activities are the evaluation of individual courses, graduate surveys, and the comprehensive evaluation of faculties, which also comprises the evaluation of study programs. This comprehensive evaluation introduced forms of external evaluation as well, since it is based on the combination of internal self-assessment reports and the feedback from external peers after a site visit.

Decentral level: faculties and study programs

Restructuring of academic units
In the past, University of Vienna had eight different faculties. In compliance with UG 2002, the faculty of medicine split off and became the independent Medical University of Vienna. Additionally, the rector proposed a new organisational plan, which split up the remaining parts into 18 academic units, 15 faculties and three centers (smaller faculties). Even if there may exist academic sub-units (e.g. institutes, research groups), only the faculties and centers participate in directly negotiating annual objectives agreements with the Rectorate.

Heads of Study Programs (SPL)
The organisational plan also created the new function of Heads of Study Programs ('Studienprogrammleiter', SPL). Since there are 35 SPL, the do not mirror the number of faculties. While smaller or more homogenous faculties only have one SPL, larger, more heterogenous faculties can have up to eight SPL. Additionally, one SPL can be responsible for one ore more study programs. A SPL is mainly responsible for organisational and managerial tasks, e.g. demand driven planning (annual offer of courses), quality assurance measurements and edu-

cational strategies in cooperation with the dean. SPL are nominated by the dean and appointed by the Rectorate, whom he or she also has to report to.
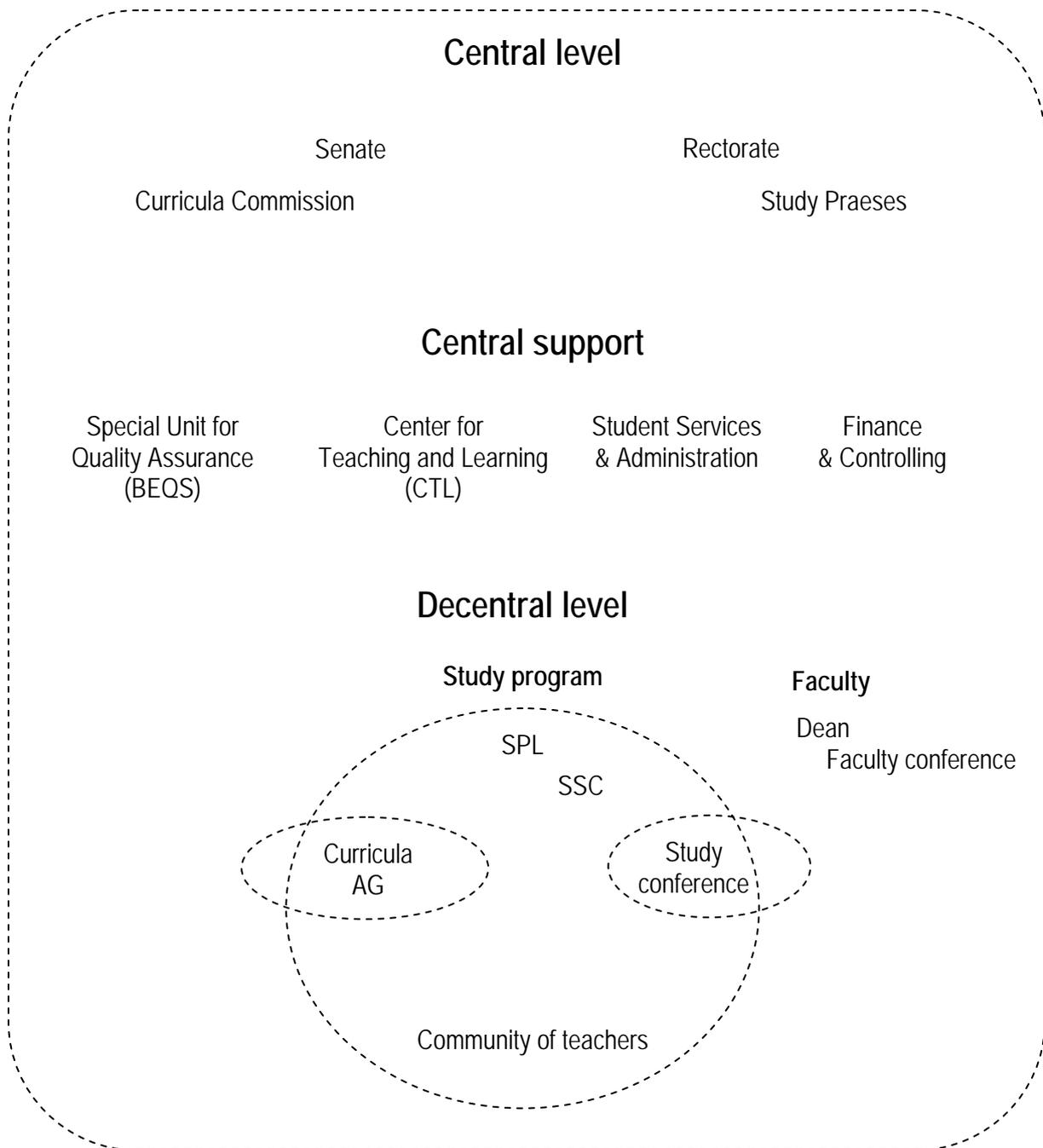

Figure 1: Actors involved in the design, implementation and improvement of study programs

Study service centers (SSC)
Rearranging and expanding existing resources, Study Service Centers ('StudienServiceCenter", SSC) have been created in 2007/08. They work as bundled support units for students and teachers at each faculty, to deal with all issues concerning the administration of teaching and study activities. Especially, they support SPL in their administrative tasks. There are also some debates, if decentral teaching support staff (especially those dealing with e-learning) should be assigned to or created at these units.

Curricula Working Groups (Curricula AG)

As mentioned before, the curricula commission of the senate can establish temporary Curricula Working Groups ('Curricular Arbeitsgruppe', Curricula AG) at a decentral level to prepare new curricula or amendments to existing ones. They are only established temporarily and are terminated, after they fulfilled their task. A SPL is not allowed to participate in a Curricula AG.

Study Conferences

As a permanent body to accompany the SPL, there also exist Study Conferences, which are composed out of equal numbers of students and academics. They act as advisory bodies, commenting on the demand based planning on the offer of courses and on organisational matters, and advising on potential improvements of study conditions.

Curricula reform

By the end of 2002, more than a third of all fields of study at the University of Vienna had been transferred to the European degree structure and split up into bachelor and master programs, while the rest were established as new diploma programs, both according to UniStG 1997.

UG 2002 required amendments of these curricula, especially the obligatory introduction of ECTS. After having completed the implementation of new governance structures in 2004, in the university planned for the next, comprehensive reform of all its curricula until 2008. For this purpose, the university started the project European Study Architecture in 2005, which had three core elements:

- completing the adaptation of the formal structure of all curricula to the European degree structure
- shifting from teacher centred to student centered planning of curricula (= the comprehensive introduction of ECTS, which meant a shift in calculations from contact hours to student workload)
- aligning curricula on learning outcomes rather than on input and content

In its first phase, a project group (composed of representatives of the Rectorate, the Senate, the Student Union and some experts) developed university wide framework regulations. Each field of study should only have one, rather general bachelor, while more differentiation and specialisation for curricula was allowed at masters level. For bachelor programs, three alternative curricula models were developed, one for stand alone curricula, a major-minor model (120 ECTS from the major discipline, 60 ECTS from a second discipline), and a 90+90 model for combinations out of two or more related disciplines.

More detailed regulations were prepared for the modularisation of curricula (composing modules as larger teaching units out of several courses, defining individual courses with reference to modules) and for a stronger sequencialisation (linear dependence between modules or between courses within a module) had been introduced. These regulations also introduced extension curricula ('Erweiterungscurriculum', EC). EC are smaller educational offerings (15 or 30 ECTS) at the University of Vienna, which can complement bachelor programs in the major model.

In addition to these formal regulations, a new process for the proposition, development and approval of new curricula had to be implemented. According to this new procedure, proposals

for new curricula now have to be addressed to the Rectorate, which checks its financial feasibility, its compliance with the development plan and its relationship to other curricula. The proposal together with a comment by the Rectorate is then passed to the Curricula Commission, which has to set up a Curricula AG at the decentral level. With the help of different support units, the Curricula AG designs a new curriculum, which is returned to the Curricula Commission and the Rectorate (for cross-checking legal and financial issues). After asking the University Council for comments, the Senate then approves the new curriculum. The same procedure also applies to amendments to the curriculum.

In 2008/09, as a result of these reforms, University of Vienna could offer 52 bachelor, 108 master, seven diploma and ten doctoral programs. (Due to national regulations, all teacher training programs in 24 different fields are still offered as diploma curricula.) 91% of all new entrants enrolled in bachelor or master programs (for an internal view on these reforms, see Hrachovec 2009).

However, due to long lasting transition regulations, until very recently some students still studied according to old curricula, which were based on AHStG 1966. Even if the Senate terminated these curricula by the end of 2008, there are still a few cases left, where old certificates had to be transferred to newer regulations. Similarly, there exist transition regulations from curricula based on UniStG 1997 to the new regulation based on UG 2002. In practice this means that the organisation still has to deal with three legal frameworks and the respective curricula.

Project 'Quality in Teaching'

Project context

Background
In 2007, the Austrian Agency for Quality Assurance (AQA) offered assistance to the University of Vienna in further developing its quality management system in one of four key areas, teaching, research, internationalisation or human resource management. This offer was funded by the Ministry.

In coordination between the Rectorate and the Senate, the university accepted this offer and decided to focus on the further development of a coherent quality management system in teaching, especially with respect to the development, implementation and improvement of curricula and study programs. Following this decision, the BEQS developed a first draft for this project, which was discussed in a meeting between university representatives and the AQA in spring 2008. As a result of this meeting and of further debates, a formal project agreement between the university and AQA could be signed in summer 2008.

Starting position
In 2008, the transfer to the European degree structure and the implementation of new curricula for bachelor, master and doctoral study programs was nearly completed at the University of Vienna. Since the 15 faculties and three centers differ considerably with respect to their profile in research and teaching, their distinct environments and disciplinary traditions, but also with respect to their organisational and teaching capacities (teacher/student ratios), heterogeneous framework conditions had to be taken into account.

This fast and efficient completion of the structural reform of curricula did not terminate the development of study programs. Rather it became obvious that a qualitative consolidation and continuous improvement of study programs, a better operationalisation of the qualitative goals stated in the development plan and a better coordination of instruments and procedures was necessary. The later especially applied to support units, which dealt with the development, implementation and monitoring of study programs, namely the CTL, the BEQS and the Finance & Controlling unit.

Since many of the involved actors already participated in various committees to coordinate teaching related activities, there was a clear whish to give the project a distinct profile, both with respect to its objectives and to its structure and activities.

Objectives of the project
In difference to the various committees, which are often under pressure to immediately achieve results and to come to fast decisions, the project should give room for strategic reflections and debates. The project should relieve from the pressures of day-to-day business and allow for the joint development of long term perspectives.

This reflective approach should also provide opportunities for gathering internal experiences and challenges at the University of Vienna, and for comparing them with international examples at other universities.

A special focus was put on the development of a joint understanding with respect to the quality of study programs and to the quality policy of the university, by discussing and integrating existing goals and definitions.

Last, but not least, the range of processes which influence the quality of study programs should be monitored and discussed to prepare for their coordination and further development.

Project structure
The VR for Educational Program Development, the VR for Student Affairs and the head of the Study Commission jointly acted as principals of the project, being responsible for decisions on the project contract, the chairing of the project steering group and for guiding the project coordinator.

Being employed on a part time basis for this project, I acted as a coordinator, being responsible for the overall coordination of the project, especially for preparing materials, for organising meetings of the steering group and for conceptualising a conference and two internal workshops.

The project steering group consisted of the principals of the project, of the study praeses, two SPL and representatives of both the BEQS and the CTL. Its role was to further define the project goals in more and to steer the process of its implementation. Especially at the beginning of the project, the steering group met frequently to discuss the goals and structure of the conference and the two workshops.

The AQA accompanied the entire project, being responsible for advising on the design of the workshops, for engaging external experts and moderators, as well as for documenting the entire process.

Quality of Study Programs

Conference and workshop

With respect to the quality of study programs, the steering group decided to focus on two main topics, on research led education ('forschungsgeleitete Lehre') and on the feasibility of study programs for students ('Studierbarkeit') especially in the context of the study entrance phase ('Studieneingangsphase', STEP).

The debate was organised in two closely connected events in spring 2009. The first was a university wide conference on the two topics, which combined local and international experiences. For each of the two topics, two SPL and one representative from a Swiss university presented their different views. Since the speakers came from six different disciplines, a considerable range of perspectives could be opened.

The following day was organised as a closed workshop for about 60 participants, especially addressing all 35 SPL, student representatives, as well as representatives of central decision making bodies and of central support units. Using the world café method, which was moderated by a former rector of another Austrian university, both topics were discussed in small groups, which later reported their results in plenary sessions.

The findings of this workshop were documented and led to a report, which was intended to offer input and stimulations for further debates (Pfeffer 2009a). The following paragraphs will summarise this report.

Relationship between research and education

Given the status of a research university, it is necessary to determine and acknowledge the specific character of education and teaching in contrast to research. While research tends towards specialisation and differentiation, education requires more generalisation and coordination. If this is the case, it is also necessary to find distinctive forms of organisation, recognition, funding and evaluation for education and research, and for mechanisms to coordinate between the two functions.

Even if there has to be a close link with research, curricula at the university should not merely mirror the research profile of a faculty in every detail. Rather, curricula should be student centered, guided by a qualification profile, which should determine the design of the curriculum. For example, this could require a joint definition of the core assumptions and disciplinary principles in a faculty, rather than a vast variety of uncoordinated research perspectives.

Apart from the qualification profile, which deals with the learning outcomes for individual students, it might be necessary to determine the profile and strategic goals of a study program. Profile and strategic goals should reflect the role of the study program in the university and in its larger environment. It should combine both quantitative and qualitative aspects.

Finally, a good relationship between research and education requires a joint responsibility of the teaching staff for the entire study program, not just individual responsibility for the single course.

Research led education at all degree levels

Research led education should characterise study programs of the university at all three degree levels, bachelor, master and PhD. However, this makes it necessary to find distinct and discipline specific teaching concepts for all three degree levels.

Research based competencies
First of all, research based competencies comprise knowledge and skills in a respective discipline or subject area. Beyond that, students should develop analytical skills, the ability to understand concepts and problem solving competencies. During their studies, students should be encouraged to develop curiosity and an investigative attitude in approaching problems. Study programs should also foster the development of literacy (reading and writing skills) at an academic level.

Research based learning
Even if some of these competencies sound very generic, only in a few cases they can be acquired in specialised courses. Predominantly, they have to be acquired in regular discipline specific courses. It is necessary to develop discipline specific learning arrangements, which aim at the development of competencies and their examination.

To name a few examples for different learning arrangements: Rather than only learning about research, students could be encouraged to perform their own investigative, research-like activities, e.g. by performing small projects. In contrast to rigidly structured curricula, students could also be accompanied in designing part of their curricula themselves. Another instrument could be the introduction of negotiated learning agreements, which award credits to extracurricular projects or activities. Or senior students could be involved in teaching activities (as tutors or buddies), if they reflect on their experiences and are rewarded with credits.

Goals and functions of the study entrance phase (STEP)
While the UG 2002 demanded the obligatory provision of a study entrance phase (STEP) in all study programs, it left the details to the universities. The workshop generated some definitions about the general goals and functions of a STEP for curricula at the University of Vienna.

First of all, the STEP should provide orientation and allow for the 'management of expectations', as it was phrased by one of the participants. Students should learn what they can expect with respect to the content, structure and goals of the individual program and be made familiar with the university as an institution in general. They should also learn, what is expected from them.

Since students come from different background, another task of the STEP should be to establish the required competences to successfully proceed in their studies. Within limits, a STEP could provide support the development of a homogenous level of necessary competences or inform how to acquire them.

Since universities tend to be a very peculiar social environment, which differs strongly from schools or families, the STEP also should have a socialising function, preparing students for a responsible use of their liberties. Additionally, the STEP should encourage the development of social ties among students, which is especially important for non-local students.

Finally, the STEP should have a decision making function. It should allow students to find out and decide early, if they feel able and willing to proceed in their studies. Complementary, the study program should gain information about its new student cohort and build up the commitment to support them.

Framework conditions for the STEP
It is still undecided, in how far the STEP should focus on a single study program or provide orientation about a range of study programs. One option could be to organise a STEP clusters of study programs, which would require coordination across several study programs.

If this is intended, new forms of budget allocation would be required which go beyond the current allocation to single programs. Additionally, it may be necessary to shift funds within study programs to focus on the specific needs in the STEP.

Beyond that, horizontal mobility of students between study programs is an issue, to allow for changes between study programs without loosing time or credits. It may be necessary to standardise structure and duration of STEP to improve this horizontal mobility.

Study information
Currently, there exist several different, both centrally and decentrally maintained web spaces, which offer study information. As a result, this causes overlaps and gaps, as well as unclear responsibilities in providing information. A solution could be a centralised responsibility for the structure and the edition of information, matched with a decentral responsibility for the content.

While study programs definitely profit from clearly structured curricula, it is not clear, it what form additional information about the study program should be provided. It might be necessary to develop 'popularised' interpretations of the study program, which clarify expectations both for students and for teachers.

In some cases, study programs have developed additional information, which even offered tools for the self assessment of prospective students. Beyond that, more investments in study counselling services may be a contribution to manage expectations of prospective students.

Quality development of study programs

Workshop
For winter 2009, it was agreed to organise a second workshop, which should focus on the quality management of study programs. Goals of the workshop were to jointly analyse existing structures and procedures which influence the quality of study programs and to develop recommendations for their improvement.

Under the title 'Study Programs: Development, Implementation, Improvement', about 20 people have been invited to participate, mainly from the Rectorate and the Senate, as well as from central support units (BEQS, CTL, Study Services, Finance & Controlling), but also student representatives, deans and SPL. Additionally, an internal moderator (a professor with a strong reputation), an expert from a German quality assurance agency (ACQUIN) and an expert from AQA participated in this workshop.

The workshop started with a presentation by the German expert on his experiences in accrediting and certifying institutional quality management systems in teaching. For the following debates in workgroups, I had prepared two brief presentations. For the first, I had made use of ACQUIN's quality improvement cycle and attributed to each of its four fields (objectives, concept, implementation, monitoring) respective procedures at the University of Vienna (figure 2). For the second debate, I had sketched an organisational chart to illustrate the interplay

between all actors which are important for the design, implementation and improvement of study programs (figure 1). During the first debate, workgroups were heterogeneously composed, while during the second debate their composition mirrored functional groups according to the organisational chart.

Again, the findings of the workshop were documented and led to an extended report (Pfeffer 2009b), which was structured in the following ten recommendations.

Defining quality development as a joint task of the university
While terms like quality assessment and quality management tend to be interpreted as specialised tasks of a few actors, the debate made it clear that the quality development of study programs has to be defined as the joint task of the entire university.

While there are very distinct responsibilities in place, it is necessary to maintain and to further improve the interaction and coordination between different actors. This applies both to vertical interaction (involving central decision making bodies, support units and decentral units) and to horizontal interaction (between Rectorate and Senate, between different support units, between study programs and their faculties). Quality development can not only focus on the enforcement of decisions and on control, but it has to give room for discursive interpretations, negotiations and feedback.

Clarifying objectives and strategic focus of educational offerings
The reform of curricula at the University of Vienna led to an increased variety of its educational offerings, especially with respect to master programs and extension curricula (EC).

It may be necessary to stronger clarify the mission and strategic focus of individual educational offerings, both in quantitative terms (e.g. their position in overall portfolio of the university, their academic and societal relevance) and in quantitative terms (e.g. resources, demand, completion). To strengthen the university's potential for innovation, it may also be necessary to clarify decision making procedures for commissioning, continuing, but also terminating educational offerings, in case they are not longer fulfilling their purpose.

Implementing joint guidelines for quality
Some documents already defined general guidelines for the quality of study programs at the University of Vienna, e.g. research led education, employability, or feasibility for students.

To make these general guidelines effective for the development of curricula and their implementation in study programs, these guidelines have to become relevant in regular procedures, e.g. for approval of curricula, in evaluations or in negotiations on objective agreements. However, these general guidelines should not be seen as an attempt for centrally determined, detailed regulations, but have to be interpreted by and discussed with decentral units.

Operationalising curricula
Since the written regulation of curricula has to be approved in a complex and demanding procedure, there raises the question, what and how much has to be determined in this document, and how curricula can be made operational at the decentral level.
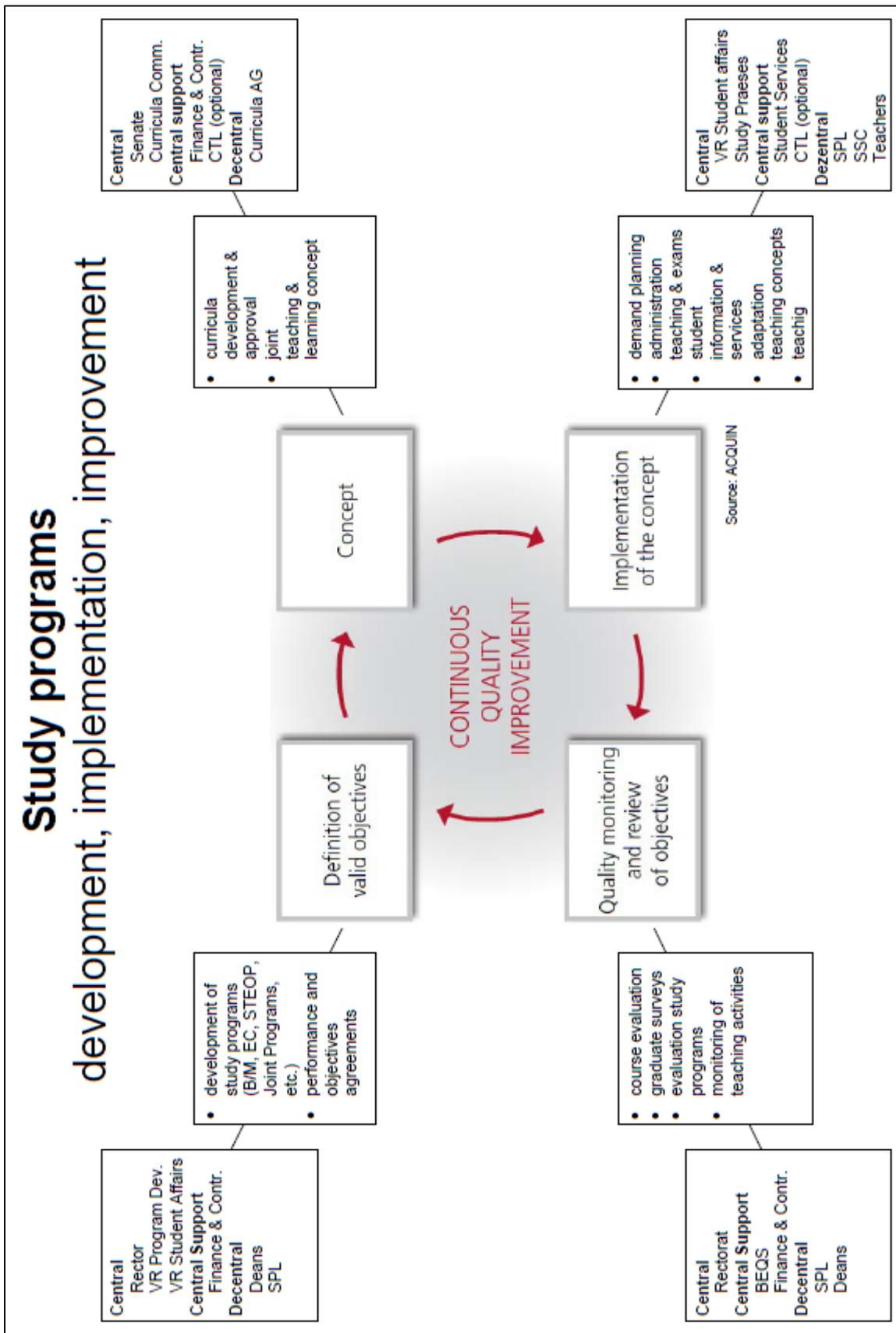
Study programs

development, implementation, improvement

Central
Senate
Curricula Comm.
Central support
Finance & Contr.
CTL (optional)
Decentral
Curricula AG

- curricula development & approval
- joint teaching & learning concept

Central
VR Student affairs
Study Praeses
Central support
Student Services
CTL (optional)
Dezentral
SPL
SSC
Teachers

- demand planning
- administration
- teaching & exams
- student information & services
- adaptation teaching concepts
- teachig

Source: ACQUIN

Concept

Implementation of the concept

CONTINUOUS QUALITY IMPROVEMENT

Definition of valid objectives

Quality monitoring and review of objectives

- development of study programs (B/M, EC, STEOP, Joint Programs, etc.)
- performance and objectives agreements

- course evaluation
- graduate surveys
- evaluation study programs
- monitoring of teaching activities

Central
Rector
VR Program Dev.
VR Student Affairs
Central Support
Finance & Contr.
Decentral
Deans
SPL

Central
Rectorat
Central Support
BEQS
Finance & Contr.
Decentral
SPL
Deans

Figure 2: Continuous quality improvement cycle for study programs

To reduce the need for formal approval at the central level and to increase the room to manoeuvre for study programs, it may be useful to regard the written regulation of a curriculum more as general regulatory framework rather than as a detailed prescription of all activities. In this understanding curricula should focus on general goals (e.g. qualification profile) and principle and provide a simply and robust internal structure. This could also require complementary documents and procedures, which describe and specify study programs in more detail, but which are in the sole responsibility of decentral actors (e.g. the study program and the faculty).

Reducing structural over-determination of curricula, offering choices
In difference to older curricula, a more linear structure of curricula made it easier for the university to plan educational processes and to monitor the progress of students. However, these reforms also led to more rigidly defined boundaries between study programs and to complaints of students about a structural over-determination of curricula, increased numbers of exams and reduced choices in designing their personal curricula.

To avoid these problems, curricula should reduce the amount of linear dependences (especially between individual courses) and of too detailed regulations. It could be necessary to reconsider both the balance between teaching and examining, and between smaller courses and larger modules. Additionally, it might be useful to consider, if normative regulations (prescriptions and entitlements according to curricula) could be complemented with more discursive forms of interaction (application and negotiation).

Clarifying responsibilities for quality within study programs
The UG 2002 describes two different, somehow contradictory responsibilities with respect to educational offerings, the institutional responsibility of the university for its curricula, and the personal responsibility (in the case of teachers holding a venia docendi even the liberty) of the individual teacher for his or her course. The lack of detail in the law makes it necessary to find arrangements, how to relate the institutional and the individual responsibility in a productive way. One way could be to define a joint definition of teachers for the quality of their study program, which would go beyond the responsibility for the individual course.

According to its organisational plan, at the University of Vienna SPL are mainly responsible for the management of study programs and for implementing quality assessment measurements. Increasingly, they gain importance for further developing the quality of study programs. SPL report to the Rectorate, but also depend on their deans, who have to approve educational budgets and teaching assignments. An extended framework for the interplay between SPL, dean and teaching staff may clarify the responsibilities and competencies of SPL.

Creating places and procedures for quality development
Beyond defining responsibilities and competencies of individuals, it may also be necessary to create places and procedures for developing the quality of study programs.

One of these places could be the study conferences, which currently act as an advisory body to the SPL. Study conferences should be more frequently used and encourage active participation of teachers and students. In the long run, a re-conceptualisation of the study conferences may be considered, e.g. by also assigning them the tasks of the only temporarily active Curricula AG. Beyond that, it may be necessary to consider ways to involve the community of teachers and to strengthen their joint responsibility for study programs.

Strengthening the link between research and education
The close link between research and education is an institutional goal of the University of Vienna. It should become a guiding principle for decisions at all levels of the university.

This could for example be realised by defining expectations towards academic staff, which comprise both research and educational activities without prescribing an even balance between the two. Additionally, it might be useful to allow for different forms of contributions to educational activities, which go beyond the traditional patterns of teaching. To strengthen the link between research and education would also require developing new forms of remuneration and recognition, which make excellence in teaching attractive and a clear career asset.

Improving the feasibility of study programs
The feasibility of study programs has at least three dimensions, the feasibility for students, the feasibility with respect to resources, and the feasibility in administrative terms.

The feasibility of study programs is not only determined by the content, structure and workload of curricula, but also by the way in which they are organised and delivered. This may involve range and availability of courses, but also the schedule and coordination between different courses.

The feasibility with respect to resources does not only involve budgets, but also the availability of lecture halls and of teaching staff. Due to different employment regulations for academics, there exists a large variety of contracts for teaching staff, which makes planning difficult.

The feasibility in administrative terms regards the match between curricula regulations and the range of actually offered courses, the mapping of curricula, of additional descriptions on study programs and of course offerings for student information and for monitoring purposes.

In all three cases, the simplicity of curricula can contribute to an increased feasibility of study programs. Comments on the feasibility of proposed curricula by support units and by SPL could also be valuable contributions to the quality of study programs.

Linking objectives and monitoring
Effective monitoring mechanisms require valid and verifiable goals and objectives. Before setting goals, it might be useful to check, if and how their realisation can be verified.

Since different forms of monitoring and evaluation exist at the university, which are performed by different units, it might be useful to increase the coordination between these procedures. To gain acceptance for monitoring and evaluation procedures, results should be fed back to and discussed with the observed units and individuals.

Successful monitoring and evaluation procedures should not only control, if goals and objectives are met. They also should generate feedback for a sound review and potential changes of mission, goals and objectives.

Discussion and conclusions

During the last 10-15 years, the Austrian higher education system has experienced a staccato of changes of the regulatory framework, which put much pressure on the institutions and was

sometimes perceived as a reform overload. The implementation of the European degree structure has to be analysed in this wider context and its organisational implications.

Paradigm shift from state control to autonomy and accountability
In his paper 'On the Cultivation of Quality, Efficiency and Enterprise', Neave (1988) reported about the rise of the evaluative state in steering higher education institutions in many Western European countries. With a certain delay, this trend arrived in Austria in the 1990s and still has a strong influence on the development of the Austrian higher education system, especially for state universities.

Power (2002, p. 194) explained this trend as a change of management control practices from 'command and control' to 'reflexive self control', or, as I would phrase it with respect Austrian universities, as a paradigm shift from 'state control' to 'autonomy and accountability'. This paradigm shift is characterised by a functional differentiation of formerly centralised and bundled functions. While in the past universities had been subordinated units of the Ministry, which had the overall responsibility for funding, organisation and quality control for all universities, under the new regime universities became autonomous institutions with extended freedom to determine their own organisation. The Ministry reduced its responsibilities by mainly focusing on funding decisions, while the assessment of quality increasingly becomes the responsibility of independent external quality assurance agencies. This paradigm shift was most clearly realised in the Austrian sector for universities of applied sciences ('Fachhochschulen', see for its foundation in Austria Pratt 2004), while it is still in emergence in the sector for state universities.
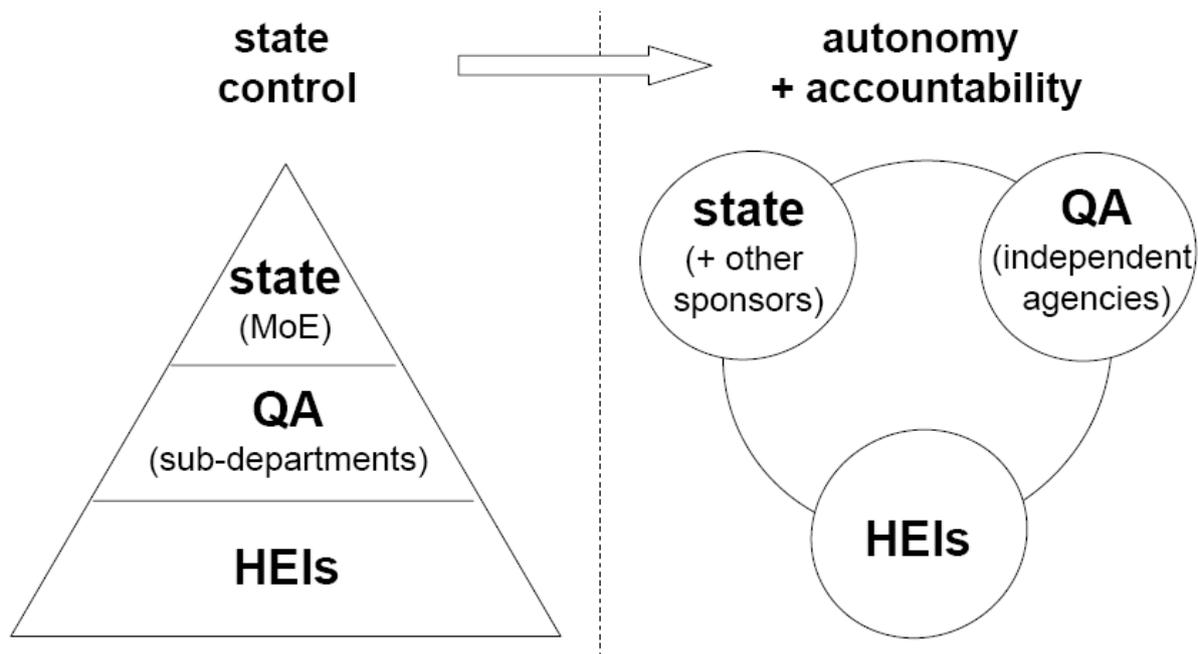

Figure 3: Paradigm shift from state control to autonomy + accountability

The introduction of autonomy to universities is accompanied by a 'managerial turn' in the concept of quality, from the quality of substantive performance to the quality of management processes (Power 2002, p. 198).

Wottawa (2001) discussed this trend in other terms. He distinguished between three different control paradigms in the relationship between universities and the state, the control of input (e.g. professors), of behaviour (e.g. compliance with detailed regulations) and of output (e.g. number of students based on previously negotiated performance agreements), arguing that traditionally universities mainly had been steered by input and behaviour control in the past, while new regulations for universities tend to emphasise output control.

Costs and outcomes of the managerial turn
Past regulations may have been detailed and rigid, but at least they were comparatively easy and cheap to administrate. While the state could withdraw from 'the murky plain of overwhelming detail' (Neave 1988, p. 12), autonomy came with new costs for universities, especially for reporting systems and for more complex planning, documentation and decision making procedures. To meet these demands, universities had to invest in new managerial capacities and new support units to build up more advanced feed back loops and professional services for the institution.

Even if Austrian state universities became independent and established new managerial structures, they still can not influence one essential parameter: the access of students. While they have to formulate institutional development plans, a complementary plan by the Ministry for the development of the national higher education system (e.g. comprising quantitative developments, demand for distinct qualifications or the coordination between different sectors of the system) is missing. Additionally, the instrument of performance agreements had been undermined by the fact that 80% of the budget had been prolonged, while most of the remaining 20% had been predetermined by old obligations. Therefore only a small fraction of the university budget was influenced by performance agreements (Wissenschaftsrat 2007).

Given these facts, it seems fair to claim that organisational reforms in the Austrian higher education system had fundamental effects on the formal structure of decision making processes, but did not yet affect the substance and the outcomes of these processes. New standards for procedures had been established, serious effects on substance and outcomes are yet to be seen. Using the concepts of Power and Wottawa, one can say that instruments of reflexive self control have been establish, while the substance for output control based on performance agreements is still very small.

Sensemaking at the University of Vienna
Both prescribed and perceived necessities (changes in the regulatory framework and the evolution of the European Higher Education Area, respectively) have put the University of Vienna under a strong and constant reform pressure. While the Ministry provided information on the formal aspects of these necessities, it did not offer much guidance or room for public debate, how to interpret the substance of these reforms, what in the essence should be achieved.

At the University of Vienna, organisational reforms led to fundamental changes of the organisational structure. Steered by an ambitious Rectorate, the university also performed a comprehensive reform of curricula by implementing the European degree structure. After the completion of these reforms, both the Rectorate and the Senate recognised the need for reflection on consolidating these reforms. Organisational reforms had changed roles and processes, curricula reforms had changed the educational products of the university.

"Sensemaking involves the ongoing retrospective development of plausible images that rationalise what people are doing." (Weick et al. 2005, p. 409) Not being the only measurement

in that respect, the project Quality in Teaching tried to develop at least two plausible images, thereby contributing to a process of organisational sensemaking at the University of Vienna.

Traditionally, curricula at state universities had tended to be merely written prescriptions for a range of individual courses to teach and study. Quality assessment therefore tended to refer either to the quality of individual courses and their teachers or to the quality of the written prescription. The debate on the quality of study programs was an attempt to shift the focus to the study program as a more complex and integrated educational product, provided by a joint organisational effort. This made it easier to develop a different set of quality requirements (e.g. learning outcomes at the level of the study program), but also to address problems like drop out or resource allocation in a different way.

"Sensemaking is about … imposing labels on interdependent events in ways that suggest plausible acts of managing, coordinating, and distributing." (Weick et al. 2005, p. 411) By attributing different, existing procedures to an idealised cycle for a continuous improvement process for study programs, the project tried to create a plausible image for the integration of distinct functions and activities into a comprehensive picture. This made it easier to create a mutual understanding among actors for their distinct tasks and to discuss the need for interfaces between procedures.

Conclusions

The reform impetus at both the national and the institutional seems to be largely driven by the whish to comply with perceived international standards in management control practices and in the structure of curricula. Predominantly these reforms have focused on formal adaptations, while substantive goals seem to be comparatively more difficult to define and to implement. It seems to be obvious that complementary reforms, which deal with quantitative developments, the content of institutional profiles and the composition of educational portfolios, will become necessary in the near future. While the Ministry is still lacking behind in that respect, the University of Vienna already took the first steps to meet these challenges.

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